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"Live Free or Die!"

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The following is adapted from a lecture delivered at Hillsdale College on March 9, 2009.

My remarks are titled tonight after the words of General Stark, New Hampshire's great hero of the Revolutionary War: "Live free or die!" When I first moved to New Hampshire, where this appears on our license plates, I assumed General Stark had said it before some battle or other—a bit of red meat to rally the boys for the charge; a touch of the old Henry V-at-Agincourt routine. But I soon discovered that the general had made his famous statement decades after the war, in a letter regretting that he would be unable to attend a dinner. And in a curious way I found that even more impressive. In extreme circumstances, many people can rouse themselves to rediscover the primal impulses: The brave men on Flight 93 did. They took off on what they thought was a routine business trip, and, when they realized it wasn't, they went into General Stark mode and cried "Let's roll!" But it's harder to maintain the "Live free or die!" spirit when you're facing not an immediate crisis but just a slow, remorseless, incremental, unceasing ratchet effect. "Live free or die!" sounds like a battle cry: We'll win this thing or die trying, die an honorable death. But in fact it's something far less dramatic: It's a bald statement of the reality of our lives in the prosperous West. You can live as free men, but, if you choose not to, your society will die.

My book *America Alone* is often assumed to be about radical Islam, firebreathing imams, the excitable young men jumping up and down in the street doing the old "Death to the Great Satan" dance. It's not. It's about us. It's about a possibly terminal

manifestation of an old civilizational temptation: Indolence, as Machiavelli understood, is the greatest enemy of a republic. When I ran into trouble with the so-called "human rights" commissions up in Canada, it seemed bizarre to find the progressive left making common cause with radical Islam. One half of the alliance profess to be pro-gay, pro-feminist secularists; the other half are homophobic, misogynist theocrats. Even as the cheap bus 'n truck road-tour version of the Hitler-Stalin Pact, it made no sense. But in fact what they have in common overrides their superficially more obvious incompatibilities: Both the secular Big Government progressives and political Islam recoil from the concept of the citizen, of the free individual entrusted to operate within his own societal space, assume his responsibilities, and exploit his potential.

In most of the developed world, the state has gradually annexed all the responsibilities of adulthood—health care, child care, care of the elderly—to the point where it's effectively severed its citizens from humanity's primal instincts, not least the survival instinct. Hillary Rodham Clinton said it takes a village to raise a child. It's supposedly an African proverb—there is no record of anyone in Africa ever using this proverb, but let that pass. P.J. O'Rourke summed up that book superbly: It takes a village to raise a child. The government is the village, and you're the child. Oh, and by the way, even if it did take a village to raise a child, I wouldn't want it to be an African village. If you fly over West Africa at night, the lights form one giant coastal megalopolis: Not even Africans regard the African village as a useful societal model. But nor is the European village. Europe's addiction to big government, unaffordable entitlements, cradle-to-grave welfare, and a dependence on mass immigration needed to sustain it has become an existential threat to some of the oldest nation-states in the world.

And now the last holdout, the United States, is embarking on the same grim path: After the President unveiled his budget, I heard Americans complain, oh, it's another Jimmy Carter, or LBJ's Great Society, or the new New Deal. You should be so lucky. Those nickel-and-dime comparisons barely begin to encompass the wholesale Europeanization that's underway. The 44th president's multi-trillion-dollar budget, the first of many, adds more to the national debt than all the previous 43 presidents combined, from George Washington to George Dubya. The President wants Europeanized health care, Europeanized daycare, Europeanized education, and, as the Europeans have discovered, even with Europeanized tax rates you can't make that math add up. In Sweden, state spending accounts for 54% of GDP. In America, it was 34%—ten years ago. Today, it's about 40%. In four years' time, that number will be trending very Swede-like.

But forget the money, the deficit, the debt, the big numbers

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with the 12 zeroes on the end of them. So-called fiscal conservatives often miss the point. The problem isn't the cost. These programs would still be wrong even if Bill Gates wrote a check to cover them each month. They're wrong because they deform the relationship between the citizen and the state. Even if there were no financial consequences, the moral and even spiritual consequences would still be fatal. That's the stage Europe's at.

America is just beginning this process. I looked at the rankings in *Freedom in the 50 States* published by George Mason University last month. New Hampshire came in Number One, the Freest State in the Nation, which all but certainly makes it the freest jurisdiction in the Western world. Which kinda depressed me. Because the Granite State feels less free to me than it did when I moved there, and you always hope there's somewhere else out there just in case things go belly up and you have to hit the road. And way down at the bottom in the last five places were Maryland, California, Rhode Island, New Jersey, and the least free state in the Union by some distance, New York.

New York! How does the song go? "If you can make it there, you'll make it anywhere!" If you can make it there, you're some kind of genius. "This is the worst fiscal downturn since the Great Depression," announced Governor Paterson a few weeks ago. So what's he doing? He's bringing in the biggest tax hike in New York history. If you can make it there, he can take it there—via state tax, sales tax, municipal tax, a doubled beer tax, a tax on clothing, a tax on cab rides, an "iTunes tax," a tax on haircuts, 137 new tax hikes in all. Call 1-800-I-HEART-NEW-YORK today and order your new package of state tax forms, for just $199.99, plus the 12% tax on tax forms and the 4% tax form application fee partially refundable upon payment of the 7.5% tax filing tax. If you can make it there, you'll certainly have no difficulty making it in Tajikistan.

New York, California… These are the great iconic American states, the ones we foreigners have heard of. To a penniless immigrant called Arnold Schwarzenegger, California was a land of plenty. Now Arnold is an immigrant of plenty in a penniless land: That's not an improvement. One of his predecessors as governor of California, Ronald Reagan, famously said, "We are a nation that has a government, not the other way around." In California, it's now the other way around: California is increasingly a government that has a state. And it is still in the early stages of the process. California has thirtysomething million people. The Province of Quebec has seven million people. Yet California and Quebec have roughly the same number of government workers. "There is a great deal of ruin in a nation," said Adam Smith, and America still has a long way to go. But it's better to jump off the train as you're leaving the station and it's still picking up speed than when it's roaring down the track and you realize you've got a one-way ticket on the Oblivion Express.

"Indolence," in Machiavelli's word: There are stages to the enervation of free peoples. America, which held out against the trend, is now at Stage One: The benign paternalist state promises to make all those worries about mortgages, debt, and health care disappear. Every night of the week, you can switch on the TV and see one of these ersatz "town meetings" in which freeborn citizens of the republic (I use the term loosely) petition the Sovereign to make all the bad stuff go away. "I have an urgent need," a lady in Fort Myers beseeched the President. "We need a home, our own kitchen, our own bathroom." He took her name and ordered his staff to meet with her. Hopefully, he didn't insult her by dispatching some no-name deputy assistant associate secretary of whatever instead of flying in one of the bigtime tax-avoiding cabinet honchos to nationalize a Florida bank and convert one of its branches into a desirable family residence, with a swing set hanging where the drive-thru ATM used to be.

As all of you know, Hillsdale College takes no federal or state monies. That used to make it an anomaly in American education. It's in danger of becoming an anomaly in America, period. Maybe it's

time for Hillsdale College to launch the Hillsdale Insurance Agency, the Hillsdale Motor Company and the First National Bank of Hillsdale. The executive supremo at Bank of America is now saying, oh, if only he'd known what he knows now, he wouldn't have taken the government money. Apparently it comes with strings attached. Who knew? Sure, Hillsdale College did, but nobody else.

If you're a business, when government gives you 2% of your income, it has a veto on 100% of what you do. If you're an individual, the impact is even starker. Once you have government health care, it can be used to justify almost any restraint on freedom: After all, if the state has to cure you, it surely has an interest in preventing you needing treatment in the first place. That's the argument behind, for example, mandatory motorcycle helmets, or the creepy teams of government nutritionists currently going door to door in Britain and conducting a "health audit" of the contents of your refrigerator. They're not yet confiscating your Twinkies; they just want to take a census of how many you have. So you do all this for the "free" health care—and in the end you may not get the "free" health care anyway. Under Britain's National Health Service, for example, smokers in Manchester have been denied treatment for heart disease, and the obese in Suffolk are refused hip and knee replacements. Patricia Hewitt, the British Health Secretary, says that it's appropriate to decline treatment on the basis of "lifestyle choices." Smokers and the obese may look at their gay neighbor having unprotected sex with multiple partners, and wonder why his "lifestyle choices" get a pass while theirs don't. But that's the point: Tyranny is always whimsical.

And if they can't get you on grounds of your personal health, they'll do it on grounds of planetary health. Not so long ago in Britain it was proposed that each citizen should have a government-approved travel allowance. If you take one flight a year, you'll pay just the standard amount of tax on the journey. But, if you travel more frequently, if you take a second or third flight, you'll be subject to additional levies—in the interest of saving the planet for Al Gore's polar bear documentaries and that carbon-offset palace he lives in in Tennessee.

Isn't this the very definition of totalitarianism-lite? The Soviets restricted the movement of people through the bureaucratic apparatus of "exit visas." The British are proposing to do it through the bureaucratic apparatus of exit taxes—indeed, the bluntest form of regressive taxation. As with the Communists, the nomenklatura—the Prince of Wales, Al Gore, Madonna—will still be able to jet about hither and yon. What's a 20% surcharge to them? Especially as those for whom vast amounts of air travel are deemed essential—government officials, heads of NGOs, environmental activists—will no doubt be exempted from having to pay the extra amount. But the ghastly masses will have to stay home.

"Freedom of movement" used to be regarded as a bedrock freedom. The movement is still free, but there's now a government processing fee of $389.95. And the interesting thing about this proposal was that it came not from the Labour Party but the Conservative Party.

That's Stage Two of societal enervation—when the state as guarantor of all your basic needs becomes increasingly comfortable with regulating your behavior. Free peoples who were once willing to give their lives for liberty can be persuaded very quickly to relinquish their liberties for a quiet life. When President Bush talked about promoting democracy in the Middle East, there was a phrase he liked to use: "Freedom is the desire of every human heart." Really? It's unclear whether that's really the case in Gaza and the Pakistani tribal lands. But it's absolutely certain that it's not the case in Berlin and Paris, Stockholm and London, New Orleans and Buffalo. The story of the Western world since 1945 is that, invited to choose between freedom and government "security," large numbers of people vote to dump freedom every time—the freedom to make your own decisions about health care, education, property rights, and a ton

of other stuff. It's ridiculous for grown men and women to say: I want to be able to choose from hundreds of cereals at the supermarket, thousands of movies from Netflix, millions of songs to play on my iPod—but I want the government to choose for me when it comes to my health care. A nation that demands the government take care of all the grown-up stuff is a nation turning into the world's wrinkliest adolescent, free only to choose its record collection.

And don't be too sure you'll get to choose your record collection in the end. That's Stage Three: When the populace has agreed to become wards of the state, it's a mere difference of degree to start regulating their thoughts. When my anglophone friends in the Province of Quebec used to complain about the lack of English signs in Quebec hospitals, my response was that, if you allow the government to be the sole provider of health care, why be surprised that they're allowed to decide the language they'll give it in? But, as I've learned during my year in the hellhole of Canadian "human rights" law, that's true in a broader sense. In the interests of "cultural protection," the Canadian state keeps foreign newspaper owners, foreign TV operators, and foreign bookstore owners out of Canada. Why shouldn't it, in return, assume the right to police the ideas disseminated through those newspapers, bookstores and TV networks it graciously agrees to permit?

When *Maclean's* magazine and I were hauled up in 2007 for the crime of "flagrant Islamophobia," it quickly became very clear that, for members of a profession that brags about its "courage" incessantly (far more than, say, firemen do), an awful lot of journalists are quite content to be the eunuchs in the politically correct harem. A distressing number of Western journalists see no conflict between attending lunches for World Press Freedom Day every month and agreeing to be micro-regulated by the state. The big problem for those of us arguing for classical liberalism is that in modern Canada there's hardly anything left that isn't on the state dripfeed to one degree or another: Too many of the institutions healthy societies traditionally look to as outposts of independent thought—churches, private schools, literature, the arts, the media—either have an ambiguous relationship with government or are downright dependent on it. Up north, "intellectual freedom" means the relevant film-funding agency—Cinedole Canada or whatever it's called—gives you a check to enable you to continue making so-called "bold, brave, transgressive" films that discombobulate state power not a whit.

And then comes Stage Four, in which dissenting ideas and even words are labeled as "hatred." In effect, the language itself becomes a means of control. Despite the smiley-face banalities, the tyranny becomes more naked: In Britain, a land with rampant property crime, undercover constables nevertheless find time to dine at curry restaurants on Friday nights to monitor adjoining tables lest someone in private conversation should make a racist remark. An author interviewed on BBC Radio expressed, very mildly and politely, some concerns about gay adoption and was investigated by Scotland Yard's Community Safety Unit for Homophobic, Racist and Domestic Incidents. A *Daily Telegraph* columnist is arrested and detained in a jail cell over a joke in a speech. A Dutch legislator is invited to speak at the Palace of Westminster by a member of the House of Lords, but is banned by the government, arrested on arrival at Heathrow and deported.

America, Britain, and even Canada are not peripheral nations: They're the three anglophone members of the G7. They're three of a handful of countries that were on the right side of all the great conflicts of the last century. But individual liberty flickers dimmer in each of them. The massive expansion of government under the laughable euphemism of "stimulus" (Stage One) comes with a *quid pro quo* down the line (Stage Two): Once you accept you're a child in the government nursery, why shouldn't Nanny tell you what to do? And then—Stage Three—

what to think? And—Stage Four—what you're forbidden to think . . . .

Which brings us to the final stage: As I said at the beginning, Big Government isn't about the money. It's more profound than that. A couple of years back Paul Krugman wrote a column in *The New York Times* asserting that, while parochial American conservatives drone on about "family values," the Europeans live it, enacting policies that are more "family friendly." On the Continent, claims the professor, "government regulations actually allow people to make a desirable tradeoff—to modestly lower income in return for more time with friends and family."

As befits a distinguished economist, Professor Krugman failed to notice that for a continent of "family friendly" policies, Europe is remarkably short of families. While America's fertility rate is more or less at replacement level—2.1—seventeen European nations are at what demographers call "lowest-low" fertility—1.3 or less—a rate from which no society in human history has ever recovered. Germans, Spaniards, Italians and Greeks have upside-down family trees: four grandparents have two children and one grandchild. How can an economist analyze "family friendly" policies without noticing that the upshot of these policies is that nobody has any families?

As for all that extra time, what happened? Europeans work fewer hours than Americans, they don't have to pay for their own health care, they're post-Christian so they don't go to church, they don't marry and they don't have kids to take to school and basketball and the 4-H stand at the county fair. So what do they do with all the time?

Forget for the moment Europe's lack of world-beating companies: They regard capitalism as an Anglo-American fetish, and they mostly despise it. But what about the things Europeans supposedly value? With so much free time, where is the great European art? Where are Europe's men of science? At American universities. Meanwhile, Continental governments pour fortunes into prestigious white elephants of Euro-identity, like the Airbus A380, capable of carrying 500, 800, a thousand passengers at a time, if only somebody somewhere would order the darn thing, which they might consider doing once all the airports have built new runways to handle it.

"Give people plenty and security, and they will fall into spiritual torpor," wrote Charles Murray in *In Our Hands*. "When life becomes an extended picnic, with nothing of importance to do, ideas of greatness become an irritant. Such is the nature of the Europe syndrome."

The key word here is "give." When the state "gives" you plenty—when it takes care of your health, takes cares of your kids, takes care of your elderly parents, takes care of every primary responsibility of adulthood—it's not surprising that the citizenry cease to function as adults: Life becomes a kind of extended adolescence—literally so for those Germans who've mastered the knack of staying in education till they're 34 and taking early retirement at 42. Hilaire Belloc, incidentally, foresaw this very clearly in his book *The Servile State* in 1912. He understood that the long-term cost of a welfare society is the infantilization of the population.

Genteel decline can be very agreeable—initially: You still have terrific restaurants, beautiful buildings, a great opera house. And once the pressure's off it's nice to linger at the sidewalk table, have a second café au lait and a pain au chocolat, and watch the world go by. At the Munich Security Conference in February, President Sarkozy demanded of his fellow Continentals, "Does Europe want peace, or do we want to be left in peace?" To pose the question is to answer it. Alas, it only works for a generation or two. And it's hard to come up with a wake-up call for a society as dedicated as latterday Europe to the belief that life is about sleeping in.

As Gerald Ford liked to say when trying to ingratiate himself with conservative audiences, "A government big enough to give you everything you want is big enough to take away everything you have." And that's true. But there's an intermediate stage: A

government big enough to give you everything you want isn't big enough to get you to give any of it back. That's the position European governments find themselves in. Their citizens have become hooked on unaffordable levels of social programs which in the end will put those countries out of business. Just to get the Social Security debate in perspective, projected public pension liabilities are expected to rise by 2040 to about 6.8% of GDP in the U.S. In Greece, the figure is 25%—i.e., total societal collapse. So what? shrug the voters. Not my problem. I want my benefits. The crisis isn't the lack of money, but the lack of citizens—in the meaningful sense of that word.

Every Democrat running for election tells you they want to do this or that "for the children." If America really wanted to do something "for the children," it could try not to make the same mistake as most of the rest of the Western world and avoid bequeathing the next generation a leviathan of bloated bureaucracy and unsustainable entitlements that turns the entire nation into a giant Ponzi scheme. That's the real "war on children" (to use another Democrat catchphrase)—and every time you bulk up the budget you make it less and less likely they'll win it.

Conservatives often talk about "small government," which, in a sense, is framing the issue in leftist terms: they're for big government. But small government gives you big freedoms—and big government leaves you with very little freedom. The bailout and the stimulus and the budget and the trillion-dollar deficits are not merely massive transfers from the most dynamic and productive sector to the least dynamic and productive. When governments annex a huge chunk of the economy, they also annex a huge chunk of individual liberty. You fundamentally change the relationship between the citizen and the state into something closer to that of junkie and pusher—and you make it very difficult ever to change back. Americans face a choice: They can rediscover the animating principles of the American idea—of limited government, a self-reliant citizenry, and the opportunities to exploit your talents to the fullest—or they can join most of the rest of the Western world in terminal decline. To rekindle the spark of liberty once it dies is very difficult. The inertia, the ennui, the fatalism is more pathetic than the demographic decline and fiscal profligacy of the social democratic state, because it's subtler and less tangible. But once in a while it swims into very sharp focus. Here is the writer Oscar van den Boogaard from an interview with the Belgian paper *De Standaard*. Mr. van den Boogaard, a Dutch gay "humanist" (which is pretty much the trifecta of Eurocool), was reflecting on the accelerating Islamification of the Continent and concluding that the jig was up for the Europe he loved. "I am not a warrior, but who is?" he shrugged. "I have never learned to fight for my freedom. I was only good at enjoying it." In the famous Kubler-Ross five stages of grief, Mr. van den Boogard is past denial, anger, bargaining and depression, and has arrived at a kind of acceptance.

"I have never learned to fight for my freedom. I was only good at enjoying it." Sorry, doesn't work—not for long. Back in New Hampshire, General Stark knew that. Mr. van den Boogard's words are an epitaph for Europe. Whereas New Hampshire's motto—"Live free or die!"—is still the greatest rallying cry for this state or any other. About a year ago, there was a picture in the papers of Iranian students demonstrating in Tehran and waving placards. And what they'd written on those placards was: "Live free or die!" They understand the power of those words, so should we. ■

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DID YOU KNOW?

Paul A. Rahe, the Charles O. Lee and Louise K. Lee Chair in the Western Heritage at Hillsdale College, has published an important new book entitled *Soft Despotism, Democracy's Drift: Montesquieu, Rousseau, Tocqueville, and the Modern Prospect* (Yale University Press).